

# No Divisions Among You

1 Corinthians 1:4-17

Craig Wong, Grace Fellowship Community Church, January 15, 2017

So, brothers and sisters, our journey in 1 Corinthians has begun. As you heard from the text that brother George read for us. This morning we actually get to meet a little more closely the Corinthians that Sharon introduced us to last week.

I remembered from last week that Sharon shared with us sort of a laundry list of the issues that were plaguing them. Much was wrong; much was wrong and ill about this congregation. And Paul was deeply concerned. You see, in this letter that he wrote it was just about two, three years before that, that he had ended his 18 months stay at that congregation. It was Paul that had planted that church. It was Paul that had shared the gospel. Some of you may have went back to Acts 18 or could remember in Acts 18 that Paul had traveled from Athens to Corinth, just about 15 miles away. And was met with great resistance from the Congregation there, the Jewish congregation. And yet, the congregation leaders actually bowed their knee to Jesus Christ, became Christians and a church was born.

Again, there was lots of friction. Sospheus, who you remember in the opening verse of this letter, was one of the synagogue leaders, a scribe, who was beaten up because of the anger and resistance of that congregation. But he, too, converted. So this congregation was about, you know, still in its early years and within a few years, right? we see this trouble. And so Paul returns and as Sharon preached to us last week, they needed to hear the big picture again. They needed to be reminded of who they were. They needed to hear the grand symphony of which they were a part. Remember, Sharon said “hear the music”. Hear the music. So what was this music? It was this promise, it was this calling. A promise fulfilled, that they are being drawn into the fellowship of God’s son, Jesus Christ, the Lord. It’s a huge thing, it’s a massive thing. A calling that goes beyond anyone’s human imagination. It’s a glorious thing. The whole first 9 verses speak of this glory.

But being called into a fellowship is being called into a family. Right? My parents were good to warn us kids that, they always told us when you marry someone, you’re not just marrying an individual, and you’re marrying a family. Alright? And we all know how interesting relationships with in-laws can be. Right? But, you know, in-laws is one thing, but even just marrying this strange person is enough, right? I mean if we could imagine, I’m imagining that when Sharon and Dickie, for instance, were married, you know, I’m sure there were folks in at that ceremony saying “well, this ought to be interesting”. You know? Right? You know, Doug and Amy, “this ought to be interesting”. Craig and Tina, “this ought to be overwhelming”. That’s kind of what my best man said when he went out there, by the way. But, yeah, so, bringing people together. There’s just so many examples of this. I know many of you have gone on vacations together and I think we say, huh,

wow, those two families going on vacation together, that ought to be interesting. That's what it's like when you bring different people together. So, on one hand, it's this sort of like wonderful idealic idea. But when it comes down to the nitty gritty of it, it gets kind of messy. It can get very interesting.

So in that way, this new church in Corinth was probably one of the most interesting of the early experiments. The birth of new churches throughout the Mediterranean, the Corinthian one is probably one of the more interesting ones. Because although it started among a Jewish group, it quickly became very diverse. And as Sharon said last week, Corinth was a port city. You had people from all over coming to this place. It was in Greece, and so you had all the people and the influences of the Greek culture there. And I think it's going to be important as we enter into our text this morning to recognize the context of which this congregation was in. Context helps us, I think, to not just look at this group as having this crazy, wild problems. But maybe in understanding the context, we can actually sympathize with their situation. Maybe relate to it.

So, one thing to, by the way, Corinth is such an interesting city and I wish I could say more about Corinth. And we will. As we travel into this book, we're going to be --- you're going to be learning more and more about the context because there's so many dimensions to it. Which is true of our city in San Francisco as well. But the thing that I want to focus on is Corinth as an intellectual power, as a center. So as I mentioned earlier, Corinth was just 15 miles away from Athens. For those of you who studied civilization and history and all that, which is all of you at one point or other, we know that Greece was an intellectual center in our world, among others. But so when you think about Greece, you think about Plato, and Socrates, and Aristotle and many other famous philosophers. Their impact in our world is inestimable.

It was the center of philosophy. Phileo means brotherly love. Sophia means wisdom. So philosophy was the love of wisdom and Greek was the center of the love of wisdom. We're going to come back to that in a bit. But with this milieu, was spawned a whole culture of thinkers, and of educators, and of teachers and professors.

One such man was a fellow by the name of Plutarch. He was a learned man. He was a professor. He was a philosopher in his own right. He was certainly a student of all these great philosophers himself. He also came from wealth which characterized many in Greece. And we are fortunate to actually have a piece of his journal. Now, one of the things that happens in Corinth was something called the isthmian games. Corinth was in an isthmus, like a little land bridge. And so many would come to Corinth to watch these games. The games were not as big as the Olympics but it took place a year before and a year after the Olympics. So it was a big deal and many came to it. Certainly the citizens of Athens would travel the short 15 miles to come to the games. In fact, when they arranged, they negotiated with Corinth to preserve many front seats at the games for the Athenians.

So, Plutarch was one who enjoyed the games and so we have a text he wrote in his journal about his time in Corinth which I find profoundly helpful. I hope it's helpful to you. I also want to just say up front that I sort of para-phrased it. I sort of changed the language; I updated the language a little bit so that it's a little more accessible. And I have asked my brother Lance to share this letter with you:

*“During the Isthmian Games in Corinth, the chairman, Antonius Sopsis, hosts big banquets for all the foreign visitors, and even bigger ones for the locals. I usually make it a point to avoid these over-crowded affairs. However, when Antonius hosted a private gig at home for his closest, learned friends, I of course was present. After the first course of the meal, a special honor was presented to a distinguished rhetoric professor by some of his students who had just won a debate contest at the Games. Upon receiving the ceremonial wreath and palm leaf, he asked about the significance of the palm leaf. Another guest stood up to explain, saying, “When one presses down on a piece of palm wood, it does not bend and give way, but rather, curves up in the opposite direction, as though resisting the one applying the force. So it is with the Games. Those who are too weak to bear the strain are pressed down and forced to bend, but the strong can push back and are therefore raised up and exalted, not only in body, but in mind as well.”*

The strong will be raised up and exalted. I want you to hold onto that thought as we continue onto 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, because Paul's going to have a lot to say about that. By the way, I want to thank you Lance. I don't want you to take this the wrong way but I couldn't think of a better person to read that text than you.

But as you can see, as you heard this journal entry from Plutarch, there's so much you can exegete, there's so much you can interpret from that one little entry. It's about the dinners you host. It's about how many guests come. It's about who comes, who you associate with. It's about the honor that are given, the honors received and it's also about who disciples you and who teaches you how to wax eloquent wise words.

So I mentioned earlier, that philosophy means the brotherly love of wisdom. In other words, philosophers love wisdom like a brother. So I want to talk with you about a group of people called the Sophist. I'm not talking about phileo sophists, I'm just talking about sophists. So if philosophers are lovers of wisdom, then sophists are just about the wisdom. There's not necessarily a love for wisdom. There's certainly a love about talking philosophically, about being persuasive, about being convincing, about sounding intelligent, about being able to woo a crowd with your words, or more importantly, to influence people with your words. That's what the sophists were all about.

Actually, the ability to speak eloquently, to speak persuasively became profitable which means that philosophy became a commodity, and how to speak philosophically became big business. Aristotle, himself despised the sophists because for him, these guys, in his

words, were basically making money with sham wisdom. Because for the sophists, it actually didn't really matter so much, the content of what you said, it was more important how you said it. Now I know that there's this range, there's going to be a range of how this plays out in people. It's not necessarily that all the sophists had just empty things to say, but my point being here, is that, you really began to grow schools of thought, ways of communicating. Jackie, she would know about all of this, as a rhetoric professor.

And so, many of you, had to do this in school. Some of you have Debate Clubs in your high schools. Some of you may have been a part of them. Some of you may have been forced to debate. I mean, one of the things that I know that you, that those of you in high school have had to do. You've had to argue for something you didn't even believe in. You had to make a convincing argument for some policy or some position that you don't agree with. But see, that's the thing. That whole art of convincing. Even if you don't even believe it, you could find that path leading back to Greece.

So Sophists were influential in every realm of Roman Society. Not just politics and government but all the trades and all the professions and in every area. It wasn't so much, so like, it was one thing to do a trade well but it was also important to be able to talk about it well as well. My brother and I were talking this morning, a lot of it is about marketing, about being able to sell, to sell your services so that you could sell yourself.

Politicians employ rhetoric in order to get elected. Say whatever is necessary to get elected. And so, what we find here, is a congregation that had begun basically just to fall back into that. They had forgotten that they were called into one fellowship and they began to just re-reflect the culture of their day. And so we see in our text, that there is almost like there's these different parties, those who belong to Paul, those who belong to Apollos, those who belong to Cephas, those who belong to Jesus.

But I think it's helpful to sort of think about how this may have played out. Paul was their founding pastor. He was the one who birthed them into a congregation. It was his teaching that gave rise to them as a congregation. And so, for many of them, they're going to say, I don't think we're going to have anyone as good as our founding pastor. Those were the good days when Paul was around.

Another group is going to say "well, Apollos really knows what he's talking about". Now, you see Apollos himself comes from another center of great intellect which was Alexandria in Africa. And so he was a learned man, Jewish man. He was raised and trained, mentored. He was student of a very wise Jewish philosopher by the name of Philo. We read about him also in Acts 18. And so when Paul left, Apollos came. He was a believer now. You might remember that Aquila and Priscilla had to pull him aside because he had certain parts of the gospel wrong. It's a really beautiful picture because he was a very, very learned, intelligent man but he, too, had to learn, he had to learn from this

husband and wife who brought him into their home and taught him. And so he came to Corinth and taught in this congregation. But for many, they're like, oh my gosh, this guy can really speak. He is amazing with words. I'm with Apollos.

Peter, it's not clear whether Peter actually ever visited Corinth but his influence was very widespread. And, of course, we know Peter from the gospels. He was one of Jesus' disciples and he was also really the main apostle to the Jews. And so, if you think about this congregation, the Jews in this congregation are going to like Peter because "he understands us, he knows our traditions, and he speaks our language. I am of Peter".

And then, you have this 4<sup>th</sup> group, the Jesus party. These are the ones that say "well, I don't know about you but we're of Jesus". Now, of course, at first glance, it seems kind of like, well, that's good, right? They follow Jesus, what's wrong with that? Well, the problem with that is that in saying that they are of Jesus, they're implying that everyone else isn't.

And so what we have here are a bunch of factions based on how people are viewing the leader. They have committed the sin of putting more importance on the messenger rather than the message. You see, Paul is concerned, because although they have been called into one fellowship, the fellowship of Jesus Christ, they're doing the exact opposite. They are living as though Christ was butchered into pieces. Now, the word in this text for divided is the word you use for butchering up a piece of meat. So Paul is saying, you are butchering Jesus into a bunch of pieces. In you doing so, they are elevating themselves, these groups. And in doing so, they're dismissing others. So not only are they butchering Christ but they're butchering Christ's body. And this is why they had to hear the music again. They needed this doxology. Commentators will talk about verse 4-9 as a doxology, a hymn of praise, a brief hymn of praise.

Called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ, you see, in this doxology, Paul reminds them, "Corinthians, you lack no spiritual gift, God's grace has been bestowed upon you, you're enriched in all speech and knowledge. There's no need to compete for these things. There's no need to secure an expert. Every gift in the body is needed to know Christ and to live out this calling. Everyone, every single one of you is a gift. Be the Christ, Grace Fellowship, that you are. So it's a little bit like, as parents, speaking to our grown children, "you're an adult now, act like one. Stop your childish tweeting in the wee hours of the night, for crying out loud."

I think what's helpful about understanding the context of Corinth, is that, maybe their sin is not as grotesque and out there as we might first see. We read, oh my gosh, I can't believe they're so divisive and all that. And yet, it's really important to just see that they basically just resembled the culture of their day. It was normal to do that. You secure experts in order to achieve what you thought you needed to be, in order to achieve your

success, your upward mobility. This is just what you did. This was the water that they swam in. So much of the church's falling short of Christ's calling, is simply just blending into the larger culture. We don't have to do anything dramatic, really. This is true, right? This is true for us in San Francisco and this is why I think Corinth is so helpful for us. We are like Corinth. We are surrounded by experts. We have specialists, consultants. We have sophists, in the realms of social media and social entrepreneurship and green technology and even social justice. I mean where do you go for experts in movement building and social justice? You come to San Francisco, this is the place. But I was talking to a friend of mine the other day and she was saying, you know, the world of social justice practitioners are as divided and vicious as the business world around them.

I also want to say, too, that I think we could relate to the passage in another way. We were founded by an exceptionally articulate pastor, Bob Appleby. He was gifted. He was gifted in being able to give a word that was clear and articulate. We also have a pastor Sharon, who is exceptionally eloquent in speech. These are gifts. This is not a critique. But there is a way, when you grow up in a congregation where words are delivered with such articulation that whether or not it is explicitly expected or said, we can sort of assume that, that articulation is a virtue. Like, somehow, we have to say it as best as we can. And I want you to know if you're one of those, and I have been one of them, that stays up to the wee hours of the night to craft a perfect Call to Worship because you want to say it as well as you possibly can. I just want you to be free from that.

I'm not espousing sloppiness, I'm not espousing not being thoughtful with what you say. I'm not saying that. But I guess what I am saying, is that it's way more important for you to bring yourself than to bring your best crafted words. Does that make sense? Be free from the tyranny of being articulate, of being polished. And we know, that is a culture that we have grown up in, here. So, this kind of conversion is going to require leaning into that calling. It's very easy just to, by default, fall back to the ways that we have either been shaped by our culture or even within. We really need to lean in to this calling into one fellowship with Jesus.

And I believe this is what it means to be united in one mind and purpose. Now the word mind, Paul is going to be returning back to this in Corinthians, so I'm not going to talk a whole lot about what it means to have one mind, except I think it's pretty clear that, right at the heels of this doxology, verses 1 through 9, that it's clear that Paul wants us to be all about the same purpose. To give ourselves to this glorious calling as wild, and weird, and mysterious as it is. It's really clear that he's not talking about all saying the same things or all thinking exactly the same things. But he's saying that there is this posture that leans toward one another, that we expect that every gift, to every person here, is needed in the body. That's what he's talking about when he talks about being of one mind and one purpose, that we are all together pursuing Jesus together.

And so, again, we don't each have to have all the gifts and that's not what Paul is saying. He's saying that as a whole, in the body of Christ, all the gifts that are needed are present. We don't have to, like, seek them out on our own. We can actually just receive the gifts, the particular gifts that God has given to us and expect that those gifts are going to be used for the whole. That means every single one of you, from Keenan to Bill Yuen. Everybody.

We need to live into the doxology. We need to live into our calling, the fellowship of the Lord, Jesus Christ. So, I want us this week to work on this and for those of you, I really hope that all of you can come on Thursday nights because we are digging into this text together. We're going to be wrestling with the text that is preached on, so this coming Thursday, we're going to be having a chance to dig more further into verses 10 through 17.

But maybe as preparation for that, I really want you to think about what this means for each of you. Are there ways you put the messenger over the message? Are there ways you are following only those who serve your interest or that serve your sense of what it means to be the church. Are your words, perhaps, or maybe the conversations you have with each other, are they causing others through your words to do the same. Or are we, without even knowing it, creating division?

Then, another question that I want us to ask which is sort of the positive, the other side of that, is "what would it mean for you to really embrace the gift of each other". What would it mean for you to lean in and to live as though you really did believe that all of you, the people sitting next to you and behind you, that you actually need them. You need their gifts. What would it look like concretely for you to practice that in this congregation? We all need to practice this, myself included, for sure.

And I want to leave you with a third thing, and that is "how might we also learn better from the larger body of Christ, from other congregations". See, there's a reason why it is good for us to, well, first of all, we have seen how valuable and how powerful it's been to be connected to Sunday and Elder Shamang and Boyce Wallace and Beth. And all these relationships have very much changed us, so we know this, we have practiced this.

But it's also going to be true of our neighboring churches here in this neighborhood. We have important things to learn from the congregation at St. Johns. We have important things to learn from someone like Julia and her ministry in the Tenderloin, with YWAM. And it doesn't mean we're always going to agree with everything. It doesn't mean we're always going to have the same theological convictions about things. But there is something that we have to learn from each one in the larger body.

And I say this because we really are at a critical time and I want you to know that, in saying that, I'm not saying that this word is more needed now than it was before our new President is coming into the scene. I am not saying that. This word is always been needed.

But I do think there's something about our new president that is really calling, is a wake-up call for the church.

You see, one of the things that commentators will make a point of saying is that, what Paul was calling the Corinthians to went in complete polar opposite with the larger political strategy of the Roman Empire and of many leaders of empires throughout the generations.

"Divide et impera." That's the Latin for "Divide and Rule" or "Divide and Conquer". It's a time honored strategy for rulers to rule. I mean, what is that about? So there's a reason beyond just organization to divide an empire into provinces and into tetrarchs and throughout the world. Because what you want to do, is that, you want to break those who want to rule into small enough pieces where you want each of them, themselves, are powerless to take over or to resist. And you will "Divide and Conquer" in any way possible. Sometime it's just by organization, other times, it's through words and creating foment, creating division just by words. And at other times, of course, it just by military force. There's all kinds of ways to do this, economically, politically, so forth. But "Divide and Conquer", that was the way of the world. That **IS** the way of the world.

It was at this very time, the reason why there were, by the way, many Jews in Corinth, growing numbers, was because, and we read this in Acts also, that Claudius had ordered the removal of the Jews from Rome. This is just another example of "Divide and Conquer". The Jews are getting a little too aggressive and we need to get them out of Rome. They're a threat and so they were disbursed throughout the empire.

But it was also during this time, probably round the time of this letter, that Nero was coming into power and he is regarded as one of the most ruthless emperors in history. He was an expert in "Dividing and Conquering" and he was an expert in doing it also with his words.

So this coming Friday is Inauguration Day. Our new President may lack the eloquence and wisdom of the Greeks but I am really concerned about what I see as a very ruthless imperial instinct. And how quick he is to use words to crush those who would oppose him and to divide, and to set people one against the other. It's pretty blatant. It's unavoidable. I actually have a hard time looking at the news each morning because I actually fear just reading just another way he's doing this.

I believe that there are going to be casualties just by virtue of the words he says alone. I am worried about this. And we are going to need to be ready, brothers and sisters, to stand in the gap. We need to be ready to be able to care for those who are casualties of this kind of "Divide & Conquer" force that is before us. I am not saying this wasn't true before but there are concerns particular to this President that I have. But this is why the church needs to be one because we're not going to be able to do this unless we are one. And so I think a



lot of our reaching out to the larger church is so much a part of this. How can we bridge this divide we have between us as a church in America. But we're not going to be able to practice that very well unless we're practicing that here too. We're not going to be able to be for the world what we can't live out ourselves.

In closing, although I've called attention to our President-elect, also know that our battle is not ultimately against flesh and blood and that's why I really wanted us to hear John 17 this morning because Jesus knows that our battle is not against flesh and blood but he knows that it is the evil one who seeks to divide. And so Jesus prays for us. Isn't that kind of amazing? He prays for our protection from Satan so that we may be one. It's kind of great to know that the one who calls us into fellowship with him is also praying to the Father for our oneness. We can really get into this because Jesus is for us, and he's with us and he's going to make this possible. You see, brothers and sisters, and this is my close, let there be no divisions among you because, in Christ, there aren't any. Amen